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Prying and the CIA

Senator Ervin was understandably provoked when lobbying by the Central Intelligence Agency derailed his "bill of rights for federal employees," indefinitely postponing a Senate debate on the legislation.

The bill is a good one. It would forbid unwarranted prying by government agencies into the private lives of their employees, by either lie-detecter or "psychological" tests. In general, it is a sound principle that enlistment in government service should not mean baring one's innermost secrets as a price.

But we are not entirely convinced that the senator is right in insisting that these regulations apply to the CIA and the National Security Agency, whose personnel sometimes deal in classified business of the utmost sensitivity.

It is more or less routinely assumed that persons whose private lives may make them vulnerable to blackmail or extortion

should not be in security agencies. Accordingly, it is hardly unreasonable for the CIA and other intelligence bodies to ask a larger license to pry into the tastes and backgrounds of their employees than, say, the Post Office.

"My research has revealed no language in our Constitution which envisions enclaves in Washington, Langley or Fort Meade, where no law governs the right of citizens except that of the director of an agency," Senator Ervin told the Senate angrily. Perhaps not. But this seems a bit more rhetorical than reasonable.

No citizen is required to join the CIA, so no issue of coercion arises. Those whose private lives ill equip them to handle security or classified matters would be well-advised to look outside the CIA for employment. Private lives are none of the government's business, unless they stand to jeopardize national security. Then they are.